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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000698

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY) AND NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)
NSC FOR ABRAMS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/04/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MASS](#) [OREP](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL TANNER MEETINGS FOCUS ON COUNTERTERRORISM,
NATO

TUNIS 00000698 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

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ZFR - ZFR - ZFR - CANCEL TUNIS 698. MESSAGE WILL BE RESENT
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TUNIS 00000698 002 OF 003

15. (S) Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane also used his May 31 meeting with the delegation to argue for increased US aid, particularly Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Morjane told Reps. Tanner, Gillmor, Shimkus and Emerson that the Tunisian Armed Forces, which have never been a GOT priority, are stretched to the limits by recent increases in counterterrorism and border surveillance activities. (NOTE: Historically, GOT budget priorities are education, social programs and funding for the Ministry of Interior. END NOTE.) To combat terrorism, the United States and Tunisia must cooperate, both in terms of sharing information and intelligence, but also through the provision of equipment and material assistance. In response to a question from Rep. Gillmor, Morjane explained that that terrorist threat to Tunisia is complicated by the difficult nature of the country's borders, particularly in the southern desert region. He opined that he did not believe the Al-Qaeda system has any structure or hierarchy, as it seems that even a single individual could announce he is an Al-Qaeda cell. More dangerous, said Morjane, is the fact that terrorism has become an ideology, rather than a means to an end. Terrorism has no borders, therefore military and security cooperation is more important than ever. "We talk about globalization," said Morjane, but the terrorists "are using it" to their advantage.

16. (C) Returning to the need for more military assistance, Morjane clarified that ten years ago FMF cuts were not serious. Today, the need is urgent, as half of Tunisia's army is on the borders and the maintenance of these efforts is extremely costly. Morjane explained, "We count on (the United States) because we cannot depend on ourselves." Tunisia has an urgent need for helicopters, which are

suitable for the desert and mountainous border terrain, to support the troops on the borders. Highlighting the need for US assistance, Morjane explained that the Tunisian Air Force is comprised almost entirely of US equipment, and it is difficult to change, even if other partners were willing to help. He added that material and financial constraints prevent Tunisia's military from offering greater support for bilateral and multilateral objectives, including UN peacekeeping operations. Tunisian Air Force Chief of Staff Brigadier General Mahmoud Ben M'hamed added that Tunisia is familiar with NATO equipment and procedures, but cannot engage in joint operations "because our equipment is too old." With US assistance for Tunisia's equipment, the military could dedicate its own funds to upgrading existing facilities and engaging in more exercises. BG Ben M'hamed lamented the delays in Tunisia's receipt of refurbished UH-1H helicopters, which the minister assured Rep. Emerson Tunisia is ready to put into immediate use. Chairman Tanner told the Minister that he would look into the helicopters' delay, while Rep. Emerson promised to examine Tunisia's FMF levels.

17. (C) Turning to NATO, Minister Morjane urged the group to convey to NATO the importance of explaining its objectives to the Arab and Muslim world. "NATO has a perception issue in the region," Morjane said, in part because of its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. As NATO reviews its mission, "don't let people think NATO is anti-Muslim," warned Morjane.

Deputies: Ready for NATO, not Focused on Security

18. (C) During the CODEL's May 31 meeting with Foued M'bazaa, President of the Chamber of Deputies, M'bazaa said the Chamber enjoys good relations with the US Congress and would be interested in expanding its relationship with NATO parliamentarians. M'bazaa suggested an annual Maghreb-NATO parliamentary meeting could be established, particularly as the Chamber's First Vice President Afif Chiboub leads the Arab Maghreb Union Parliamentary Council. Chairman Tanner welcomed the idea, noting that NATO is shifting its focus from Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean. When Congressman Shimkus stressed the need for greater information sharing of threat information, M'bazaa, detouring from GOT talking points, said that the disrupted December/January terrorism plot targeted tourist areas, not the US embassy. While the investigation is underway, M'bazaa said that it is clear that the Tunisian public rejects such activities and extremism, more generally. Ambassador said that the USG recognized Tunisia's success in disrupting the plot and clarified that he had been officially informed the embassy was a target. In

TUNIS 00000698 003 OF 003

any case, said M'bazaa, such issues are the purview of the GOT, not the Parliament, which focuses on legislation.

Comment

19. (C) The CODEL's visit capped several busy weeks of bilateral engagement, particularly on military issues. The GOT clearly welcomed the visit as another indication of the strong bilateral relationship and chose to highlight economic and security ties while glossing over sensitive political issues. Given the increasing terrorist threat and the urgent need for military assistance, we can expect similar themes to be echoed during FM Abdallah's upcoming visit to Washington.

110. (C) On counterterrorism cooperation, officials preferred to stick to generalities rather than address the delegation's specific requests for greater information sharing. It is unclear if M'bazaa's statement that tourist areas were the target of the disrupted cell, or if he in fact was revealing more than he should have about the true threat. Unfortunately, the continued lack of substantive details from

the GOT about the event means we have little by which to judge his statement. END COMMENT.

¶11. (SBU) CODEL Tanner did not clear this message.
GODEC